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Alexander, William John
The mystery of Hamlet

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The Mystery of Hamlet
William John Alexan

amusement known as "rushing," I would say that whenever and wherever you find one of your dear little playmates showing signs of smartness in his work, his talk, or his play, take him tenderly by the hand, by both hands, by the back of the neck if necessary, and lovingly, playfully but firmly, lead him to a knowledge of higher and more interesting things.

RUDYARD KIPLING

THE WARRIOR

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He wrought in poverty, the dull grey days,
But with the night his little, lamp-lit room
Was bright with battle flame, or through a haze
Of smoke that stung his eyes he heard the boom
Of Blücher's guns: he shared Almeida's scars,
And from the close-packed deck, about to die,
Looked up and saw the Birkenhead's tall spars
Weave wavering lines across the Southern sky:
Or in the stifling 'tween-decks, row on row
At Aboukir, saw how the dead men lay:
Charged with the fiercest in Busaco's strife.
Brave dreams are his—the flick'ring lamp burns low—
Yet couraged for the battles of the day
He goes to stand full face to face with life.

JOHN MCCRAE

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THE MYSTERY OF HAMLET

"HAMLET" is surely the greatest of Shakespeare's plays. It has more than any other of his works interested minds of the most varied calibre, and tastes of the most different order. It has exercised its fascination alike over the philosophic thinker, the learned student, the fastidious connoisseur, the general reader, the mere play-goer. It holds the largest place in Shakespeare literature. From the days of Burbage to those of Henry Irving, it has furnished the favourite rôle for all great actors. It has, in short, always been the most popular of Shakespeare's dramas as well on the boards as in the closet. If, as Dr. Johnson asserted, it is the first object of a work of art to please, where shall we find anything of similar compass in English literature which has given so much high and permanent pleasure to so varied a constituency? Yet the bench of critics are scarcely disposed to award it first place amongst its author's writings. The election would probably fall upon "Lear" as the most tragic of the plays, or perhaps upon "Othello" as less open to criticism. Even "Macbeth," notwithstanding manifest defects, seems to possess in a higher degree than "Hamlet" those qualities which specifically belong to the drama, and which are therefore, one might suppose, the most essential to a really great tragedy. The critics plausibly urge that "Hamlet" is lacking in unity; that the action drags; that many passages and even whole scenes are not essential to the development and are of the nature of brilliant padding; finally, that, as the present paper will serve to emphasize, a cloud of obscurity and difficulty—scarcely compatible with perfect art—hangs over the whole play.

Yet surely, even if these allegations can be made good the facts in favour of "Hamlet" already adduced, w

dispose common-sense to conclude that here, as so often, not the absence of defects, but the presence of excellences is essential to the interest and vitality of a work of art; that the categories of criticism are, after all, superficial tests incompetent to decide on the real greatness of an imaginative creation. Not the qualities which can be formulated by the intellect, but a living charm, too subtle for analysis, is the source of power. A work of imaginative genius is not primarily a skilfully planned intellectual product, but a growth—an organism, whose vital principle eludes dissection. Does it ever, as a fact, occur to the spectator of "Hamlet" at the theatre, or to him who reads simply to enjoy, that the action drags, that the scenes are desultory, that the thread of interest is broken, or the unity of impression wanting? It is only when we approach in an analytic, not in a receptive frame of mind that such defects appear.

It must, however, be admitted that "Hamlet" endures this critical scrutiny which the intellect enforces, less successfully than the other great tragedies of its author; that "Hamlet" is in many respects a peculiar play. The present paper proposes to examine these peculiarities, to link them together, and show that they are part and parcel of the subject itself. This examination has been suggested by the publication during the present year of a volume entitled, "The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery," a translation of a much discussed exposition of the play, by Professor Karl Werder.

It is now some forty years since Mr. Howard Furness, in his invaluable edition of "Hamlet," drew the attention of the English-speaking world to Professor Werder's theory as to the hero's character. Although similar views have been originated independently of Professor Werder, his discussion was, and still remains, the fullest exposition of a very revolutionary conception of "Hamlet." It has now, at length, been made fully accessible to the merely English reader in the translation by Miss Elizabeth Wilder, with an introduction by the well-known Shakespeare scholar, Mr. W. J. Rolfe. This late-won honour of translation is, according to Mr. Rolfe,

fully justified by the growing acceptance with which the Klein-Werder theory, as it is called, has met. Among those who have adopted it, Mr. Rolfe mentions the names of three prominent American Shakespeare scholars: Furness, Hudson, and Corson; to these may be added that of Mr. Rolfe himself. No English writer of eminence, however, is cited as a supporter; and the weightiest book of Shakespeare criticism that has appeared in England for many years, Professor A. C. Bradley's "Shakespearean Tragedy" (1904), wholly rejects it. This, it may be maintained, is merely an indication of the conservative tendencies of English scholarship; for the new interpretation is radically subversive of the orthodox and currently accepted conception of Hamlet's character. "It sweeps aside," says Mr. Furness, "every vestige of Goethe's explanation with all theories akin to it. It affirms Hamlet to be a man of action, never at a loss, never wavering, taking in at once the position of affairs, adjusting himself thereto with admirable sagacity, and instantly acting with consummate tact as occasions require."

A paragraph from Professor Werder, as rendered by Miss Wilder (pp. 48-9), will serve to put the theory before us:

"What is Hamlet to do? What is his actual task? A sharply defined duty, but a very different one from that which critics have imposed upon him. It is not to crush the King at once—he could commit no greater blunder—but to bring him to confession, to unmask and convict him. That is Hamlet's task, his first, nearest, inevitable duty. As things stand, truth and justice can come to light only from one mouth, that of the crowned criminal, and if he or someone connected with him does not speak, then the truth will be forever hidden. That is the situation. Herein lie the terrors of this tragedy. This is the source of Hamlet's enigmatical horror and the bitterness of his misery. The secret of the encoffined and unprovable crime is the unfathomable source out of which flows its power to awaken fear and pity. This single humanly natural fact has never been perceived for more than a century. And yet the fact is so convincing that when it has once been comprehended it must remain for ever clear."

In short, the obstacle to Hamlet's executing vengeance upon his uncle is at once external and valid. It is an *objec-*

tive difficulty; whereas, according to the generally accepted view, it is *subjective*, arising from some weakness or flaw in the hero's character.

The question as to the cause of Hamlet's delay does not arise with the critics; it is suggested in the play itself. Hamlet is repeatedly represented as puzzled to account for his own inactivity; especially in Act III, sc. 4, does he debate the matter at length, without arriving at any satisfactory solution. One naturally asks then, if any *external* obstacle such as that indicated by Werder be the real impediment, how comes it that Hamlet is not conscious of this obstacle; why, with such adequate excuse, should he be so full of self-reproach? No such justification for delay does he allege when he neglects the opportunity afforded in his uncle's chamber (Act III, sc. 3), after the scene in the court theatre; on the contrary, he resorts to what seems to most readers a farfetched subterfuge:

> . . . . "and am I then revenged,
> To take him in the purging of his soul,
> When he is fit and season'd for the passage?"

Of the motive which is regarded as the
the Klein-Werder theory, there is no hint
where the dying Hamlet exclaims to H

> "O good Horatio, what a wound
> Things standing thus unkno
> If thou did'st ever hold m
> Absent thee from felicit
> And in this harsh wor
> To tell my story."

In another pass
proposes to test the
comes nearest to s
a desire for proo
So the conversa
theatre-scene (
his device, is

cations sufficient for Horatio and himself, who are already in the secret,—not that the guilty man sitting at the play shall proclaim his malefaction to the court at large. Accordingly, at the exit of the King, there is no expression of dissatisfaction, on Hamlet's part, at the failure of his device,—on the contrary, an irrepressible expression of exultation at its success. It is not wonderful then that the reason for Hamlet's delay alleged by Professor Werder never enters into the head of the unsophisticated play-goer or reader.

Against any "objective" explanations of Hamlet's conduct, similar arguments might be brought. If, indeed (as has been maintained), the ground of the hero's inaction were scruples as to the rightness of taking vengeance into his own hands,—scruples arising from Hamlet's being ethically in advance of the age and community to which he belongs —there might conceivably be an inner repugnance to the deed, which he might be unable fully to justify to himself. But it is noteworthy that the dramatist has so managed it, that the audience naturally and unconsciously accept the pro-
iety of Hamlet's killing his uncle; this, too, in the face of
ct that such an act is repugnant to their own habits
l convictions. Surely it is true that no spectator
re ever dreams (unless at the suggestion of some
mmentator) of boggling at the propriety of
ing the ultimate penalty. What, then, if
vel theories be true, are we to think of
s a dramatic artist? Of all forms of
a—the drama designed primarily for
der—is the most popular in its na-
e, and to the average man. Un-
n its main outlines and purpose
it is being enacted before him
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loes not negative—the
ience. The student is
the play than the

mere spectator; he should apprehend more fully both the whole outcome and the purpose of the details; but the fundamental ideas and emotions of the drama must be felt, although they need not be consciously formulated, in the theatre. "Hamlet," if Werder's contention be admitted, so far fails of this, that its central motive has been misapprehended by generations of play-goers, and even by Goethe, because forsooth the latter wrote his criticism when being a young man, he did not understand its meaning.

It is not proposed to take up, in the following pages, the arguments of Werder in detail. They are met in Professor Bradley's volume already mentioned; nor do they appear more plausible in the full text of the translation, than in the excerpts contained in Dr. Furness's volume. The sophistical character of the reasoning and the unquestionable misinterpretations of Shakespeare's text are only rendered more manifest through the inclusion of the weaker portions of the exposition. The stress laid, in these later days, upon originality of research is a constant temptation in the older and well-trodden provinces of criticism towards novelty rather than sanity. There is, further, a state of mind which gives caus[illegible] to such theories as we have been talking of,—the dispo- regar[illegible]n (itself often a proof of the artist's success in giving life weak[illegible] reality to his theme) to regard the personages and events more[illegible] work of imagination as actualities having an indepen- flaw; [illegible] existence. The situation comes thus to be viewed not to the[illegible]ll as the artist presents it, who for his own ends stresses tory. [illegible]ain details and omits, or lightly touches others which in [illegible] life might possibly have been of the first importance. becau[illegible] critic who unconsciously falls into such a state of mind, [illegible]ooks upon his material in the fashion of an historian, who strives to disentangle and supplement facts *accidentally* preserved. But sound literary interpretation does not thus go outside of a drama; it gives the same relative weight to various elements as does the dramatist himself, recognizing that it is but proper to assume that every detail is part of a carefully planned design. Of course, it is another matter if

we are prepared to admit that Shakespeare is a bungler, or "Hamlet," notwithstanding all its fascination, a crude and ill-constructed sketch. We cannot, until the actual examination of the play forces it, accept such an hypothesis.

Let us turn now to the "subjective" theory, which in varying forms has been long accepted by the great body of critical opinion, and which—a weightier fact—is in accord with those vaguer notions of the play existing in the consciousness of the fairly intelligent spectator as he watches a performance or of the ordinarily cultivated reader as he turns the pages for his own delight. It may be said that this attitude of the onlooker in the theatre is itself the result of the filtering downwards of accepted learned opinion; it is just as likely that the current interpretations of "Hamlet" on the stage originated at a time when the author himself instructed the "Globe" company in the proper rendering of his *dramatis personæ*.

The most authoritative explanations from the "subjective" point of view have been furnished by the two greatest critics who have discussed the problem of "Hamlet," Goethe and Coleridge. Their views are different but not inconsistent, and may be sufficiently indicated by brief quotations. Goethe says:

"To me it is clear that Shakespeare sought to depict a deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. . . . A beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him; this is too hard. The impossible is required of him—not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him. How he winds, turns, agonizes, advances and recoils, ever reminded, ever reminding himself, and at last almost loses his purpose from his thoughts, without ever regaining his peace of mind."

Coleridge is more definite:

"Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense; but in the healthy processes of the mind a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from

outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect; for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his moral power of action. . . . . In Hamlet Shakespeare seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses and our meditation on the working of our minds—an *equilibrium* between the real and imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed; his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the *medium* of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and colour not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment; Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. Thus it is that this tragedy presents a direct contrast to that of "Macbeth;" the one proceeds with the utmost slowness, the other with a crowded and breathless activity."

These two explanations agree in finding—while not denying the existence of external difficulties—the effective cause of Hamlet's inaction in Hamlet himself, and in regarding his conduct as blameworthy and indicative of weakness in the man himself. Coleridge's solution is the more specific, fixing upon a single tendency as the essential flaw; Goethe's is broader and vaguer,—and on that account, to the natural man, who prefers definiteness, less satisfactory.

Coleridge's view claims acceptance, in the first place, because it is the explanation to which Hamlet himself tends. Read, for instance, the soliloquy of Act IV, sc. 4:

> "Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
> A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do.'"

Further, this dominance of the intellectual and reflective tendency,—this thinking too precisely on the event,—is the characteristic which is chiefly emphasized throughout the play; if a play is artistically constructed, whatever is most enforced ought to be (as here it is) the most potent factor in the whole development. The thought of the paralyzing effects of intellectual activity seems to lie in the background of Hamlet's mind and emerges, not merely when he is thinking of his own case, but as a conclusion to the generalizations of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy:

> "And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action."

But perhaps the strongest confirmation of Coleridge's theory is given at the very turning-point of the play—the scene in the King's chamber (Act III, sc. 3). The doubts which Hamlet professed to feel have now been cleared away by the success of his test; the King is in his power; all things, as he himself says at the close of the preceding scene, are favourable to such a deed. Yet he does nothing. A few moments later Hamlet does, to all intents and purposes, put the King to death; he kills Polonius, thinking him to be the King. These scenes are placed side by side, we may be sure, not without reason. What constitutes the difference which accounts for Hamlet's doing on the second occasion what he deliberately neglects to do on the first? Hiding himself in his wife's chamber is scarcely one of those actions which Hamlet had enumerated as likely to make Claudius' "heels kick at heaven." Does any such thought occur to Hamlet's mind at this particular moment? Surely the impression given is that Hamlet, without thought, under the impulse of sudden rage quickened by this second case of treacherous espial, slays, as he thinks, the King. The difference between the two occasions lies in the fact that the cir-

cumstances of the first favour reflection; that in the second Hamlet does not think at all. The contrast between these scenes is a crucial point; and the "subjective" theories alone account for it.

This influence of his suggestive and subtle mental activity is repeatedly exhibited. On first hearing the message of the Ghost, Hamlet is full of resolution; he will "sweep to his revenge with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love."* On the next occasion which admits us to his inner thoughts, we hear of nothing but hesitation and delay. Has anything happened in the interval to cause this? Nothing whatever; Hamlet has had time to think. Even before the conclusion of the scene in which the Ghost appears, we see the brief opportunity for reflection already begetting this mood. Again, when Hamlet does finally accomplish his task, the occasion gives no time for precisely thinking on the event; the opportunity is unplanned and unexpected; the deed is done under a sudden impulse of rage at his adversary's treachery, and with the conviction that it must be now or never.

Notwithstanding all this, it does not escape us that Hamlet himself grasps this explanation as a make-shift,—a conjecture which does not wholly satisfy him. Nor does the solution usually seem completely adequate even to those critics who are disposed to follow Coleridge. There is an almost universal disposition to qualify or add; Dr. Bradley, for instance, emphasizes the paralyzing influence of melancholy, and of Hamlet's loss of faith in the world. And so we fall back on Goethe's more comprehensive and complex explanation. The cause of Hamlet's inaction is his character; the task required of him is an impossible one,—not in itself, but impossible for such a man.

This view puts into our hands the key to many of the difficulties of the play, which the other theories leave unsolved. We are, for instance, able to comprehend why Hamlet is

* Somebody has noted that this comparison itself is eminently characteristic of the speaker: the sphere to which his mind naturally turns is not the external world,—not the swiftness of the lightning or of the eagle; but to the inner world of thought and feeling.

puzzled to account for his own conduct. No person can, in his own case, rest satisfied with the statement, " I cannot act because I am I,—because of my own character." We naturally feel we can do what we please; we naturally seek some more simple and definite reason than our own character, for inability, on any particular occasion, to do what we wish. Now Hamlet well knows—what some of the critics deny—that he has " cause and will [*i.e.* wish] and strength and means to do it." The conscious search for the impediment leads only to a vague suggestion of a culpable indifference, of some tendency to lose action in thought, which he feels after all is not an adequate solution. Unconsciously, however, he, at least, negatives any " objective " explanation. That self-reproach, that remorseful dissatisfaction with his own conduct which is so constantly present and gives a tragic tone to the whole play (a state of mind which none of the " objective " theories can adequately motive), abundantly shows that the difficulty lies not in outside circumstances which he cannot control, but in himself. The difficulty springs from the whole complex of his character,—not merely from one tendency which might be overcome. It is not merely because conditions favour reflection that Hamlet does not slay his uncle in the chamber scene. Does not the dramatist make us feel that such a deed of violence perpetrated in cold blood is something altogether repugnant to the sensitive, refined, cultivated Hamlet? This hero requires an access of passion, such as we see at the grave of Ophelia, at the death of Polonius, or in the final scene, to spur him to activity. And how is this feeling with regard to Hamlet's character produced? By those very scenes which from the point of view of mere plot-structure are most open to cavil. Whence comes this impression of a delicate, sensitive, reflective spirit but from such passages as the seemingly needless talk concerning the gross habits of the Danes, just before the entrance of the Ghost, or the advice with regard to acting before the play-scene? In the latter case, it is to be noted that Hamlet's precepts are particularly ill designed for the

practical purpose which he may be supposed, at the moment, to have in view,—the bringing home the sense of guilt with the utmost force to the coarse-grained King. But they are the involuntary expression of the speaker's innate feeling, of his critical fastidiousness,—the sentiments of one who would prefer to err in under-doing rather than in over-doing.

Hamlet's character is of a type which (like so many characters in the imaginative work of the 19th century) manifests itself rather in sentiment and reflection than in action. We gain a better insight into the real Hamlet through the "To be or not to be" soliloquy than through the murder of Polonius, through the talk in the churchyard, than through the forging of the death warrant of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is less in his actions than in his inaction that we have the real man. The main incidents in "Macbeth" are the outcome of Macbeth's deliberate intention; the incidents of "Hamlet" are either not due to the hero at all, or are the result not of his design but of his impulse. This is true, as has already been noted, even of his final fulfilment of his task.

Left to his own tendencies Hamlet is rather a spectator of the world than an actor in it. He is intellectual, imaginative, introspective. He has a temperament such as is often found among literary men. How easily one might imagine an Addison or a Stevenson dominated by Hamlet's mood and uttering his sentiments in the talk with the gravedigger and Horatio at the churchyard! No scene probably exhibits more accurately (apart from an added touch of melancholy arising from his situation) the natural Hamlet, as he might have been, had the events of his life followed a more ordinary tenor. Hamlet is a man of culture, isolated, by his very superiority, from the age and society in which he lives; and for this he pays the penalty. He lacks the sympathy and comprehension of his fellows, which gives support. He is a student of books and of men; the very breadth of his interests tends to dissipate his energy in any given direction. He easily forgets his task and his

troubles: *e.g.* in his curiosity in regard to what is going on in the theatrical world (Act II, sc. 2). It is true that in this passage, Shakespeare, to a degree very unusual in his dramas, gives scope to his own interest and that of the audience at the "Globe" in actual contemporary events; but this talk has none the less its function in the play and is illuminative of and appropriate to the character of the speaker. And so the talk with Osric just before the closing scene affords not merely a touch of comedy for purposes of relief and contrast, but manifests the ease with which Hamlet's mind is diverted from serious and practical thoughts. And everywhere,—in the imaginative or aphoristic style of his utterance, in the wit and irony of the apparent incoherencies of his assumed madness,—the activity, fertility and subtlety of intellect and imagination are displayed. The multiplicity of his interests and ideas serves to dissipate his practical impulses. It is a phenomenon of a similar character when the poet of "In Memoriam" describes the impact of grief as being mitigated by the intellectual activities which it sets in motion:

> "Likewise the imaginative woe,
> That loved to handle spiritual strife,
> Diffused the shock thro' all my life,
> But in the present broke the blow."

We have now the key to the secret of that alleged lack of unity, of that desultoriness and defect in dramatic action of which the critics complain. The motive force on which the action (or rather the inaction) depends is character, and character of unusual subtlety and intricacy. Shakespeare is not forgetting his theme, or violating the principles of his art when he lets his hero display himself in thought and in talk on this subject and on that. It is not our dramatist's way needlessly to develop a scene or personage that he may give vent to some flow of genial inspiration, or display his aptitude for some particular sort of artistic creation. He is a severe economist in his art; he does not lavish effects without good reason. The detail and masterliness wit[h]

Iago is delineated, is needful to render Othello's conduct credible and in some measure excusable. The magic combination of varied and almost incompatible qualities in Falstaff and Cleopatra is required by the necessities of the action; in one case to make us understand,—nay, sympathize with—the predilection of a noble prince for the sordid life of thieves and tavern-brawlers; in the other, to account, without excessive degradation of Antony, for the transformation of the triple pillar of the world into a strumpet's fool. In like manner, if the character of Hamlet is displayed with a fulness and detail unparalleled among the protagonists of Shakespearean tragedy, it is because in this subtle complexity lies the source of the development and of the *dénouement*.

It may not be amiss to draw the reader's attention to what has been, in these last pages, assumed as a matter of course,—that in a properly constructed work of art nothing is accidental, every part is properly assumed to be intended to produce that impression which it naturally does produce. Where the possibilities are so absolutely limited as they are in a drama, by the exigencies of time and other considerations that belong to the stage, the artist is bound to choose out of such scenes and incidents as might occur in actual life only those which shall best further his dramatic purpose. It might be a matter of no special import that, in real life, an actual Hamlet, between the planning and the carrying out of his device to test the King through the play, should fall into the philosophical reflections of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy; or, in the perilous and pressing situation in which he finds himself on the return from his English voyage, should spend some leisure moments in exchanging repartees with a grave-digger or in moralizing with Horatio. But in a play such scenes are factors in the impression on the audience, and must be regarded as of the essence of the speaker's character. And, doubtless, that Hamlet was a man who thought and acted in this way, serves not merely to manifest, but to explain, his delay.

It is, of course, obvious that in every tragedy worthy of the name, the character of the hero counts for much in the development of the plot; but in "Hamlet" this development depends so exclusively on character—there is so little of direct external influence either of persons or events in the direction of retarding Hamlet's fulfilment of his mission,—so many elements of character come into play and these in so complex a fashion that a concise and comprehensive generalization (except in such vague terms as those of Goethe) of the central force is impossible. But in addition to all this, there is another reason for obscurity, which does not exist in other plays; we have here a tragedy not of action, but of inaction. Contrast "Hamlet" in this respect with "Macbeth." In the latter play, the tragic atmosphere and tragic outcome arise from the hero's entering on a series of actions directly designed to attain a desired end; in the latter the hero does not act towards an end, he shirks what he feels to be a duty, and by a series of evasions gives an opportunity for conditions to arise which lead him into deeds which he does not really desire to commit and which culminate in widespread disaster. This negative character of the play is exemplified in the negative character of the central scene,—the scene in the King's chamber when the hero refrains from action. Whereas in the normal type of tragedy, the central scene (the "catastrophe," as the Greeks called it,—literally, the "turning point") to which all that precedes leads up and out of which all that follows develops, contains the pregnant and crucial deed of the play, the slaying of Duncan or of Julius Cæsar, the yielding of Othello to the insinuations of Iago. Now, when something positive happens we easily satisfy ourselves with the assignment of a cause, although, in fact, the causes of any event are legion. In general we arbitrarily select as *the* cause, the new factor which sets the whole complex of causes in action—as the spark from the engine is regarded as the cause of the forest-fire. The other more or less stable factors, we call the conditions: the existence of combustible materials, the dryness of the weather, etc. But

if the forest does *not burn* even though the spark fall, it is less easy to specify a cause which shall seem adequately to account for the non-occurrence of any manifest result. If things remain *in statu quo* the cause seems to be, not one and simple, but manifold and complex. Here, one may conjecture is another source of dissatisfaction with any solution of the " Hamlet " problem.

Are the suggestions contained in this paper brought forward as affording the basis for a complete explanation? Does the writer absurdly suppose that he has solved a puzzle where so many incomparably more competent have failed? Is the reader at the heart of " Hamlet's " mystery? Even if the reader accept what has been here advanced, does he feel that there is nothing to add, that the secret has been explored, that " Hamlet " has been analyzed, ticketed, and assigned to its pigeonhole? Certainly not; the better the reader knows the play, the less likely he is to feel that the last word has been said by any critic. Is there, then, after all some flaw in structure, some want of imaginative perfection? Quite the contrary ; this mystery, this resistance to exhaustive analysis, is a quality which " Hamlet " shares with life itself. It is a testimony to its greatness as a work of art,—to the fact that " Hamlet " is an organism,—a growth, not a piece of conscious intellectual manufacture.

Sometimes an imaginative artist sets out with a generalized statement; he is interested in an abstract idea—the effects of heredity, the relations of capital and labour, or the paralysis of action by introspection; he produces a concrete illustration—a drama, a story,—of one of these. In giving his ideas concrete embodiment, he of necessity includes a wealth of detail—traits of character, touches of description, etc.,—that have no direct bearing upon the truth exemplified. Yet the reader who from the concrete picture thus produced, works back to the general proposition which is its germ will rightly feel that he has attained a satisfactory explanation of the work before him. And so when the nucleus of a character is a simple quality,

or a definite number of qualities, or the desire to exemplify a generalization (*e.g.* introspection is unfavourable to action), the reader who grasps, from the concrete delineation, these qualities or this idea, will feel that he holds the secret of the personality which the author conceived. But the purely artistic genius—a Shakespeare or a Scott—is primarily interested in the concrete; his impulse to create comes from the concrete, he thinks in the concrete, and in the concrete he ends. He begins by conceiving the man ; the individual qualities evolve from the first more or less hazy conception; just as in real life we gradually apprehend the characteristics of a new acquaintance. The progress of the most unalloyed and therefore highest artistic work is not from the abstract to the concrete, but from the vague to the definite.

This, the history of art seems to show. A Phidias sets out from an embodiment of Zeus or Athene familiar to him from childhood, wrought out by a long series of artists; he simply gives it perfection. He has not been under the necessity of constructing directly from the abstract qualities ascribed to a divinity, a concrete conception to correspond. In delineating the scenes and personages of Christianity the great Italian masters of painting worked under similar conditions.

Everything goes to show that this, too, was Shakespeare's method. Unless in one or two cases, there is absolute proof that his plays were based upon a concrete original. He reads a novel, a poem, a bit of history. As he reads, the characters and events take shape in his mind. His creative imagination is not set in motion, because his subject illustrates any abstract truth. He is interested in story and persons for their own sake. The whole situation develops before his inner eye. From the picture in his mind he selects such parts as will suit the stage, and we have " As You Like It," or " Romeo and Juliet," or " Antony and Cleopatra."

That a concrete original was before him in the case of " Hamlet," we know. Almost certainly, this was a play

which we do not now possess; but we do possess the old story of Saxo Grammaticus; and different as Shakespeare's work is, the fundamental outlines are clearly traceable in the elder version. No generalization can satisfactorily cover a work thus constructed; because no such generalization entered into it at any stage of its production. To the present writer it is incredible that Shakespeare ever asked himself what type of character did Hamlet exemplify, or why did Hamlet not immediately carry out the Ghost's injunction. Shakespeare simply saw the sort of person who would act as, in the story, Hamlet acts.

The synthetic processes by which the intellect clothes an abstract idea with concrete form can always be followed backward by a sufficiently acute analytic mind; and when this has been done, it is felt that the work is explained and, in a large measure at least, exhausted. But in the highest imaginative work, the conscious intellect only comes in at the latest stage in order to arrange, to prune, to amend a conception which has already taken bodily form. R. L. Stevenson, although he falls far short of the wholly inspired unconscious artist, was yet, in his own experience, fully aware of the essential importance of this process. "I used to write slow as judgment," he says in one of his letters, "now I write rather fast; but I am still 'a slow study,' and sit a long while silent on my eggs. Unconscious thought, there is the only method; macerate your subject, let it boil slow, then take the lid off and look in—and there your stuff is, good or bad. But the journalist's method is the way to manufacture lies; it is will-worship—if you know that luminous Quaker phrase; and the will is only to be brought into the field for study, and again for revision. The essential part of the work is not an act, but a state." Hence the ancient, and indeed the modern, idea of poetic inspiration. The great artist does not possess his subject, the subject possesses him.

So, no great work of the imagination can be condensed into a formula; none of the greatest personalities created by the imagination can be comprehended in a phrase. This is

true of any one of Shakespeare's plays and their *dramatis personæ* ; if the attempt is specially abortive in the case of Hamlet this is due to the peculiarities of the theme, already pointed out in this paper, and to the surpassing excellence of the play. "Je incommensurabler," says Goethe, "und für den Verstand unfässlicher eine poetische Produktion, desto besser."

The various views advanced by the "subjective" critics as elements in Hamlet's character which determine his inaction have, perhaps all of them, something of truth; they are only erroneous in as far as undue stress is laid upon each factor by its special advocate. They all help to enrich our conception of this infinitely suggestive creation. Even the points urged by the "objective" critics (far astray as these critics seem to be), one is ready to admit, may have been in Hamlet's mind. Why not? Was he not more ingenious and subtle than any critic who ever wrote about him? Shakespeare endowed him with his own intellect. But Hamlet certainly does not think about these external difficulties as much as the "objective" critic does; some of them never, some of them only for a moment, occupy his mind,—at least, when we are admitted to its secret counsels. And doubtless there yet remain elements of character to be emphasized by future commentators, and new obstacles to be pointed out. But the heart of Hamlet's mystery will never be reached; he is too marvellously wrought for that, —the greatest even of Shakespeare's creations. Professor Tolman closes his interesting essay with a felicitous touch; he imagines Hamlet himself as protesting to his commentators: "Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass. . . . 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe?"

W. J. Alexander

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